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UNITARIAN BELIEF

VIII. WHAT DO UNITARIANS BELIEVE ABOUT THE HOLY GHOST?

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SERMONS

OF

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What do Unitarians believe about the Holy Ghost?

"As many as are led by the spirit of God, they are sons of God."—ROMANS viii. 14.

The subject of my discourse is, "What do Unitarians believe concerning the Holy Ghost?"

In the first place, they believe, with all scholars, that the word "Ghost" is an improper one, as it is antiquated, and has lost its original sense. When our version was made, it meant the same thing as spirit, and therefore the Greek word "*pneuma*," which occurs about four hundred times in the New Testament, is translated about half the time "ghost," and the other half "spirit." Then "ghost" meant the same as the German word "*Geist*," but now it means a spectre. The American revisers recommended that the word "ghost" should be dropped in the revised version, and that "spirit" should be everywhere substituted for it; but the English revisers did not consent to this. For some reason they preferred to keep this old-fashioned term, with its false meaning, instead of translating "*pneuma*" uniformly by the word "spirit."

The term Holy Spirit, Spirit of God, Spirit of Truth and Love, means, in the New Testament, the divine influence in the soul to enable it to see what is true, love what is good, and do what is right. No one can read the New Testament without noticing how, with Christianity,

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there came a new faith in some constant inward influence on the soul. Such a divine power sent to help us is taken for granted all through. This influence is promised in the Gospels, but becomes evident in the Book of Acts and the Epistles. It is said that "the Holy Spirit was not yet given" while Jesus was with his disciples. The going away of Jesus was the condition of the coming of the spirit. "It is expedient for you that I go away," he says; "for, if I go not away, the comforter will not come to you; but, if I depart, I will send him unto you." While Jesus was with them, they leaned on him. When he was gone, they would lean on his inward strength, and that would give them the best comfort.

This is the law of growth. We begin by leaning on outward things; but we only make real progress as we learn to lean on some inward support, help, comfort. Children lean on their parents. When these are taken away, they learn to depend on themselves. The child has to lean on something till he can go alone. Then he leans no longer: he is self-supporting. So all the beauty of nature, the charm of society, books, friends, conversation, work, play, come to educate us to love them, but not to lean on them. The apostles did not love Jesus less because they no longer leaned on his outward presence: they loved him more. He went away outwardly: he came nearer inwardly. They understood him better. Therefore, he said, "I go away, and come to you." When he went away, then he came. So when the glory and beauty of the world were shut out from the blind Milton, they returned to him inwardly with a more divine radiance. When he was deprived of outward day, he sang his majestic hymn to the supreme light, "Bright effluence of bright essence increate."

The influence from above which pours into the soul is sometimes called comforter, or supporter, sometimes "the spirit of truth," sometimes "the spirit of your Father," "spirit of holiness," "spirit of life," "spirit of adoption," "spirit of God," "spirit of the living God," "the Holy Spirit which was promised," "spirit of wisdom." But under one or all names the same power is intended,— a holy, tender, comforting, life-giving, strengthening influence which comes to the soul to make it able to do duty, bear trial, be serene, generous, truthful, upright, pure. It is inward communion with the infinite truth and infinite love.

But is there any such influence? Can man be thus strengthened and helped? Is it not meant that we shall stand alone inwardly as we learn to stand alone outwardly? Can God act directly on the soul without taking away some of its freedom, its independence? Is there any evidence of such a power? We know that many profess to be converted by miraculous inward forces; but these conversions often are doubtful, because the man seems not radically changed and made better. In times of religious excitement, the Spirit is supposed to come and go, to produce a great sense of remorse, of penitence, of hope and joy. But here, too, the final result does not always encourage us to believe that this is the work of God. Men, after passing through these excitements, frequently relapse into their old condition, and sometimes are worse instead of better; become hard and cold, and indifferent to all religious truth. So people say, "It is all a superstition, this notion of spiritual influence."

No doubt there are such delusions as these, spiritual excitements which are empty and lead to nothing. Such

are no doubt counterfeit. But, if there were not real goodness, there would be no sham goodness. If there were not some real piety, there would be no hypocrites. If spiritual religion and spiritual influence were not realities, there would be no false and fanatical religion.

In the apostles' times, as now, there was superstition, folly, and fanaticism claiming to be true Christianity. Therefore, the apostles said, "Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, to see if they are from God." Credulity accepts without discrimination all that professes to be from the world of spirits: scepticism rejects it all, also without inquiry or examination. Wisdom tries the spirits, to see if they be of God. It judges the tree by its fruits. The fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, temperance, goodness. If the tree bear these fruits, it is a good tree. But, if its fruits are bigotry, strife, sectarian jealousy, deception, then the tree is a bad one. Goodness — a good character — is the one and only test of inward spiritual life.

That curious phenomenon, the speaking with tongues, was no essential part of the work of the Holy Spirit. It passed away so soon that the oldest Christian writers did not know what it was. When a mill-dam breaks, the first rush of water produces some wild phenomena; but the stream soon subsides into its channel, and flows on deep and clear, gentle and strong, a comfort to man and beast. So, when the hard dike of Pharisaic formality broke down, the sense of a divine presence, of an overflowing love, produced some strange excitement of the brain and senses. Even now, under powerful cerebral excitement, persons have been known to recall long-forgotten events, and to speak in languages they have sel-

dom heard. Some such result, probably, took place then. But the moment Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, began to speak to the people, he adopted the vernacular tongue. "Ye men of Judea," he said, "and ye that dwell in Jerusalem." And Paul laid so little stress on this strange phenomenon that he tells the Corinthians he had rather speak five words intelligibly to instruct others than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.

Is there reason, then, to believe that there is such a celestial influx? Is it possible for man to receive this interior help for his earthly work?

The experience of the human race seems to answer, "Yes." The belief has been common, not to say universal, among men. In all religions there have been prophets, soothsayers, seers, persons supposed to be possessed by a superhuman influence, a breath from on high. There were oracles and sibyls among the Greeks and Romans, inspired sages in the Oriental and Egyptian religions. Zoroaster, Buddha, Mohammed, were all by their followers thought to be inspired. The rudest tribes have had their sacred soothsayers and priests who were believed to know the secrets of the Deity, and to speak in an ecstasy words not their own. The belief, therefore, in a divine inspiration is not unnatural, but natural.

Socrates believed in an inward voice which warned him whenever he was about to do wrong, and restrained him from error. The Stoics said that a sacred spirit dwells within us, and will direct us if we listen to it and obey it. The apostles and teachers of Christianity from the beginning have trusted to this divine influence. Paul, Peter, James, and John tell us to "walk in the Spirit," not to "resist the Spirit"; "As many as are led by the

Spirit of God, they are the sons of God"; "By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, and all drink of that same Spirit"; "I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also"; "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God wherewith ye are sealed"; "Quench not the Spirit"; "Obey the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren."

All great Christian teachers from the days of the apostles till now have held the same faith in this inward power of communing with a higher world. Augustine and Anselm, Saint Bernard, Saint Francis, and Fénelon, among the Catholics, have shared this belief with Luther, Swedenborg, Wesley, Jeremy Taylor, and Channing.

Thus speaks one of the great modern heretics, Theodore Parker: "There is as natural a supply for spiritual as there is of corporeal wants; there is the same connection between God and the soul as between light and the eye, sound and the ear. . . . The world is not nearer to our bodies than God is to our souls. . . . God's inspiration is no miracle, but as regular a mode of his action on conscious spirit as gravitation on unconscious matter. . . . There are windows toward God as toward the world. . . . Each soul stands close to the omnipresent God, may feel his beautiful presence, and have familiar access to the all-Father. . . . Wisdom, righteousness, and love are the spirit of God in the soul of man."

Thus also speaks Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Worship stands in so commanding a relation to the soul of man as to be somehow the source of intellect. All great ages have been ages of belief. . . . I look on those sentiments which make the glory of the human being — love, humility, faith — as being also the intimacy of the Divinity in

the atoms. As soon as the man is right, assurances and provisions emanate from the interior of his body and mind. . . . The nameless thought, the nameless power, the supersensual heart, he shall repose on that alone."

Thus, too, speaks James Martineau : "We need to own the divine Spirit above us, and also to have it within us. . . . To learn what it is to have an invisible support, to find a living guide in every darkness. Thus is one incredibly strengthened by a constant dependence, and can better support others when his own feet are planted on this rock."

What, then, do Unitarians believe concerning the Holy Ghost ?

They believe it to be the one universal supreme Being, inwardly teaching every soul,— not a third person in the Deity, but God, the Father and Friend, talking with his child.

They believe it to be no occasional miracle sent to prophets and seers alone, but a perpetual influx from God, flowing into every soul, according to its capacity and willingness. It does not come to make a few men saints, but to make all men good. It is the Holy Spirit, because it makes men holy. It is the spirit of truth and love. It makes those who accept it more faithful, more upright, more generous, more tender.

Unitarians believe that the Holy Spirit is a spirit of communion and brotherhood ; that it brings peace and love to mankind, and that those who yield to envy, jealousy, selfishness, shut it out of their hearts. It makes a brotherhood of good men in all lands, a church below and a church above.

But Unitarians do not believe that men can receive

this inward strength and power while they shut their hearts against it by their own sinful choice or wilful disobedience. Therefore, the Scripture says, "Resist not the Spirit," "Grieve not the Spirit," "Quench not the Spirit." Man has the terrible power of turning away from God and heaven, and shutting out the Comforter and Helper.

This Spirit in the soul is not, then, an irresistible influence. It does not drive, but it leads. "He shall lead you into all truth." It comes to persuade and convince. It makes us more self-possessed, more calm, strong, sure. It is not a fire or a hurricane, but a still, small voice.

Unitarians believe the Holy Spirit to be universal, given to all who are willing to receive it; constant, not coming and going, but a perpetual divine presence within; practical, sent to make us do good and be good; a spirit of communion and brotherhood, uniting into one family all who believe in this great divine tenderness. This is the whole family in heaven and earth. The angels and archangels above are at one, thus, with the little child below; with the penitent sinner who utters his first broken, imperfect prayer; with the ignorant negro in the heart of Africa, who falls on his knees before an unknown God, and ignorantly worships him who is above the knowledge of the wisest, above the goodness of the best.

For are we not all little children when we think of God? Are we not all like babes before the omniscient wisdom? "How faint the whisper we have heard of him! But the thunder of his power who shall understand?" Yet, whenever we are led by his Spirit, we become his children. "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God."

There is one other quality of this divine presence in the soul, and one other condition of its coming. It comes to us to go from us to others. It comes to help us, that we may help others; to comfort us, that we may comfort others with the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted by God. Every true child of God becomes a mirror, more or less transparent, to reflect God's truth and love to his fellow-men. He becomes a medium, a mediator of his heavenly influence to transmit its sweetness and strength to others. Since love is one and the same thing, and he who loves God must also love his brother, it follows that we receive no divine help or comfort alone. All we receive we give. Heaven thus is the joy of receiving and the bliss of giving.

This shows us the truth in the Catholic doctrine of the intercession of saints. The saints in heaven — that is, all good people there — are mediators of the divine love, receiving it from on high, transmitting it to those below. The same great spirit flows down from God through them into our world. They are all ministering spirits. When we look up to heaven and ask for divine strength, we may believe that it comes down through the mediation of an innumerable multitude of the noble and good on high. We do not pray to them, nor ask them for their prayers. But they may help us by their love and wisdom, as we help each other here by whatever in us is of God. We are here to be mediators of God's goodness to our fellow-men. They are also mediators there. The highest angels are those who can come down in sympathy with the lowest, just as here the best and noblest man is he who can most sympathize with the forlorn, weak, wicked, and miserable of his brethren.

Thus the universe ceases to be a mere dead machine, the result of blind forces and material laws. It becomes full everywhere with intellectual beings, co-operating with God, and helping on the work of development and progress. The universe is then truly a universe, a unity, because forever proceeding from one divine, supreme mind, and filled everywhere with a spiritual family, united by a common love to God and his children. When we look up and not down, when we seek to do right and to be right, we become members of this family and fellow-helpers with the saints above and below. Then light and love come into our souls as naturally and easily as this rising tide of spring pours into trees and grasses, and warms into new life all the tribes of living creatures.

When men believe in the Holy Spirit as Jesus and his apostles believed in him, they will find God a helper, comforter, inspirer, everywhere,— not merely at church, but at home; not merely at prayer, but at work. In their shop, in their office, in the midst of all common duty, they will find the fountain of inspiration. God comes to us in the beauty of the advancing year, in the charm of human intelligence and human love, in the glad faces of little children, in the wisdom of age and the patience of the poor. He who believes in God will draw perpetual inspiration from him, and in quietness and confidence shall be his strength.

What is needed to-day more than anything else is faith in the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit. We need to believe in God's presence around us in nature, God's presence within us in our soul, in one as in the other. This joy of the returning summer, this affluence of foliage and blossom, is only one side of the life of the Deity.

He lives in nature: he also lives, moves, and has his being in our hearts. If we kept our souls open to him as nature is open to him, he would send tides and vital heat into them also. If we did not close the door of our hearts, the heavenly Comforter would enter and dwell with us.

Whitsunday, the Feast of the Holy Spirit, is a prophecy of universal peace. It tells of the coming day when all mankind shall be united in one family. The great inventions of our time which bind together nations look in this direction. The railroads which carry food from the prairies of Minnesota and Kansas to the hungry populations of Europe, the telegraph and telephone which make neighbors of people thousands of miles apart, the discoveries of science, the wonders of art, are tending to make war an anachronism and an absurdity. Instead of a thousand languages, men are now coming rapidly to speak in two or three,— English, French, German. Men grow more dependent on each other, so that, if one member suffers, all suffer. Steadily and quietly the time draws near when we shall know God from the least to the greatest, and know each other. The earth shall be full of the knowledge of God, as the waters fill the sea. The all-embracing ocean is a type of this surrounding life. Its tides sweep round the earth, and run up into the nooks and bays of every continent. It is the highway of travel; it is the common property of mankind;

"Unchangeable save in its wild waves' play,"

the same now as ten thousand years ago; equalizer of heat and cold to the continents, tempering the climates, setting in motion the air currents, sending vast quantities

of invisible aqueous vapor to fall in dews and showers, to fill brooks and rivers, to feed springs and wells, to maintain the vegetation of fields and forests, to cause grass to grow for cattle and green herb for the service of man. Such a boundless ocean of spiritual life surrounds us all, so steadily beneficent, so universally benign. But this spiritual ocean is not unconscious, unintelligent; but it is love and thought, knowledge and tender influence, ready to teach and comfort and save the souls of men.

This is the most practical of all doctrines. Every day, every hour, in all our business, we may let our souls be fed by this Holy Spirit. The merchant in his counting-room will do his work better by feeling the helpful presence of this ever-present wisdom. The teacher hearing recitations, the class reciting its lesson, the mother in her nursery, the mechanic in his shop, the farmer on the prairie, the lawyer, the physician, member of Congress, sailor, will be stronger, wiser, happier, when they have this sense of God's love in their soul. Because we do not feel this presence, there is so much discontent; unhappiness in the household; tragedies of misunderstanding between man and wife, parent and child; defalcations in business, contentions in the church. Because they do not lean on this perpetual helper, good men fall into evil, truthful men into falsehood and deceit, men of integrity slide downward into dishonesty.

This is the most practical of all doctrines. It can be put in practice at once by all of us. Look up in faith before you begin your work; look up to receive help and guidance; for those who wait on the Lord shall receive his strength.

I have already quoted Martineau: let me quote him again in conclusion:—

"Moulded of perishable and imperishable elements, we sink and rise, we sleep and wake, we faint and struggle on; toiling outwardly for transitory wants, pining inwardly with everlasting thirst. Shall God's spirit plead with us every day, and never reduce us to a sweet and holy mind? Because our feet are in the dust, shall we never go up into the mountains to pray? Shall the years sweep by, and take from us all that is mortal, without waking the immortal life within us? Shall we wait to die into the surprise of God, instead of taking his dear and solemn converse now and forever? . . . Ah! let the film of the carnal mind drop from our eyes, and, yielding ourselves to be led by the spirit of God, let us claim our divine sonship and enter on our glorious liberty. There will be no sadness then in the flow of life and change. Time will take nothing away but our delusions. It will clear the everlasting air, till we see even as we are seen."

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